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WHY FRETILIN WILL WIN

A REVIEW OF THE STRUGGLE OF THE EAST TIMORESE PEOPLE AFTER ONE YEAR OF INDONESIAN INVASION

BY Denis Freney (for publication in trade union, student newspapers etc)

It is now twelve months since Indonesian soldiers first began invading East Timor. It is nine months since the Jakarta generals launched their fullscale invasion of the Democratic Republic of East Timor, ten days after independence had been proclaimed.

Contrary to all predictions by military "experts" in Australia and elsewhere, the East Timorese people have not been crushed, by on the contrary, still control the big majority of their country. The war continues unabated, with unending atrocities from the side of Jakarta, and heroic resistance from the people, led by Fretilin.

No one can estimate the human cost to the East Timorese people of this invasion. In February this year, the newly-appointed "Deputy Governor of East Timor", ex-UDT leader Lopez da Cruz, estimated that 60,000 East Timorese had died, due to Indonesian "excesses". How many thousands more have been slaughtered ?

There is only one source of information about this genocidal war -- the voice of Fretilin and of the East Timorese revolution, Radio Maubere, and the messages picked up by Darwin Outpost Radio from Fretilin leaders in East Timor.

The Indonesian press is silent. No international journalist or observer has been allowed into East Timor, except for a few hours in Dili.

The Indonesian news blockade is easily explained : the generals want the world to forget about East Timor, to keep this a silent war in which they can carry out genocide without the world lifting an eyelid.

The world's media, and the Australian media, have been happy to oblige. Not a word of protest, no media campaign to break the blockade. With a few exceptions, the Australian press refuses to publish Fretilin reports on the fighting, because "they cannot be checked." **

Only the Canberra Times and occasionally the ABC report Fretilin's account of the war, even though Telecom messages from Fretilin leaders in East Timor come through three or four times a week.

It is coincidental that one of the main points that Australia's Ambassador to Jakarta, Mr Richard Woolcott made in his secret cables to the Foreign Affairs Department which were leaked to the Canberra Times late last year, was that the Australian Government should seek to quieten down public concern about East Timor ?

Has Fraser whispered in the ears of the press barons to "go quiet on East Timor" ? Or have they just decided it on their own initiative ?

But the press blackout has one even more serious result : those workers and students who voiced their concern so strongly against the invasion earlier this year have now been persuaded by the press silence that the East Timorese have lost ; that the war is over , and that East Timor is now part of Indonesia.

It is a sad fact that such false views in turn contribute to prepare the way for harsher action by the Fraser Government against Fretilin.

Too many people do elementary arithmetical sums : Indonesia is a large country, with 130 million population, armed forces of 300,000; support and supplies from America, Australia and the European countries -- against East Timor with a population under one million ; a guerrilla, people's army, and blockaded by sea and air from receiving any supplies.

But liberation struggles do not proceed and are not resolved by simple arithmetic.

Vietnam proved that; Cambodia proved it and Mozambique and Angola proved it.

Let us compare these heroic struggles with that of the East Timorese people.

The East Timorese have these advantages :

-- From September to December 1975 , Fretilin was in control of the whole territory. After the Portuguese colonialists fled after Fretilin, supported by the people and the conscript army, crushed the UDT coup attempt of August 1975, the whole arsenal became the property of the people. Weapons were distributed in caches throughout the mountains ; village militia were trained; strategy and tactics were worked out for a long guerrilla war.

The invaders had the problem of coccupying a country that is ideal for guerrilla warfare, that has few roads, which no bush track in Australia could equal for ruggedness. The East Timorese were ready and waiting, having gained valuable experience in the border war between September and December 1975.

Unlike the other liberation movements, Fretilin did not face an entrenched enemy ,well acqqainted with the country, occupying all strategic points, which had to be attacked in isolated positions and ambushes, a few at a time.

It was Fretilin that was well-entrenched, and the Indonesians who had to come to a foreign land and take over.

-- The Indonesians chose the worse possible time to invade : December is the height of the wet season in East Timor, in which normally impossible roads are even more impossible. The East Timorese recorded incredible achievements and resistance in the months from December 1975 to May 1976. The invaders were held to a few towns on the coast (and even some of these they were forced to evacuate several times --such as Liquiçá and Maubara), and a few inland towns occupied at heavy cost in lives and equipment.

The military-political decision to invade in December provided the East Timorese with an opportunity, in the best possible conditions, to steel themselves in guerrilla war against a vastly superior enemy.

When the dry season came, the Indonesians were able to penetrate along some other roads, take some villages, but never to break the resistance. All effects of shock, demoralisation or whatever that may have followed a massive invasion and rapid progress during an initial dry season invasion, was lost.

The Indonesians are confined to the roads and the villages on those roads. They only go where they can take their tanks, armoured cars and heavy artillery.

Any attempt to venture off the roads, into the mountains, is to court disaster. That is shown even a few kilometres from the border, when in recent months they tried to take the tiny villages of Memo and Tapo. They withdrew, leaving hundreds of dead, and many weapons behind.

-- The Indonesian army is not the American, Freneh , British or even the Portuguese army. It is, in comparison with these armies, poorly equipped, poorly trained, and very poorly paid.

Despite its overwhelming military superiority over the East Timorese, it is an army which is even less likely than the American or Portuguese armies to be able to withstand a prolonged guerrilla war. Compare also its military equipment : an airforce of 47 obsolete combat planes, 65 transport aircraft and two helicopter squadrons, a navy with 86 sea-going craft most of them small , three submarines, nine frigates and nine fast patrol boats.

All these cannot be maintained in East Timor : Indonesia has thousands of islands, airspace and waterways to patrol. It certainly does not compare with the might America poured into Indonhina.

Its army consists of some 40,000 well-trained troops, and from all reports these are mainly in East Timor. The rest are pporly paid and trained village recruits, who live a parasitic life getting enough to live on from their fellow villagers.

Finally, the Indonesian economy is shattered , by the billion-dollar Pertamina scandal. To efen finance the East Timor war for any time will be an economic distaster.

The invasion of East Timor is sowing the deeds for upheaval in Indonesia itself There is already widespread discontent over the economic crisis.

One should not expect rapid change necessarily. But it is certain that the longer the war in East Timor continues, the more certain change will be and the longer the war goes on, the more radical that change will be.

--- Finally, in common with the national liberation struggles in Indochina and Africa, the East Timorese are fighting a people's war.

Under the leadership of Fretilin, the whole people, men ,women and children are engaged in a total war of liberation. It is not a war fought by a regular army with a fixed number of troops.In addition to the regular National Liberation Army (FALANTIL) which swells each time a new weapon is captured, there are the village militaa, armed with all sorts of weapons, from the modern to the traditional.

This is the <u>decisive</u> factor in any war of national liberation. Without such total, massive support from the population, any guerrilla force will at best maintain ax precarious existence. With such support, it becomes at one with the population , which shelters,feeds and supplies intelligence to the guerrillas, and which supplements their military action against the enemy.

The Indonesian invading forces have sealed the fate of their aggression by forcing even the reactionary UDT and their supporters, because of their brutality, plunder and rape to desert the pro-Indonesian ranks ,and if not side with Fretilin then at least to seek to escape to Portugal. They provide no base of any sort for the aggressors. The Indonesian invaders by their brutality have given no alternative to the mass of the population but to join the resistance: it is literally independence or death.

Fretilin Central Committee is also providing the necessary leadership, which is equally decisive in such a war. While they have not had the experienee, ideological

education and international contact that the liberation movements have had, in Indochina and Africa , the Fretilin leadership has been through a pressure-cooker of international experience in a brief two years.

From a small underground group, they have emerged suddenly into legality after April 1974 and skilfully taken advantage of such legality to build a mass base. They successfully resisted the manouvres of colonialism and imperialism to compromise them into a neo-colonial solution , yet took part in a coalition with the conservative but nominally pro-independence UDT, without losing their identity and continuously building their mass base.

All this in one year of legality !

Then in a brief six months they defeated ,with the support of the masses, a coup attempt by UDT, controlled the country for three months in which they prepared the masses for struggle, while defeating the threat of mass starvation continued their educational and health programs, and at the same time held the Indonesian border invasion to a few villages.

In the final test, in December 1975 , they contained the fullscale invasion of Dili and Baucau to the downtown areas of these cities for almost three weeks, and then after their defence lines were broken, again held the invading forces for a couple of months to a few villages south of Dili and on the southern coast. Successive Indonesian offensive in April, May and June-July have met with minimal success, penetrating in the island only along the roads , and being defeated several times in attempts to take villages.

The epic struggle around the villages south of Baucau ,such as Venilale,and Ossu, which have changed hands several times, show the strength of the resistance. Venilale, 27 kms. south of Baucau has changed hands three times -- the invading forces being forced out on three occasions.

The fact that the border villages of Memo, Tapo and Lebos on a few kilometres each of them from the border still have not been captured graphically illustrates how powerless the invaders are when they are forced to attack off the roads, and leave their tanks behind.

Throughout this period, the Fretilin leadership has ,of course made mistakes, readily admitted them, and engaged in a process of criticism and self-criticism to make sure they are not repeated. At the same time they have called on the masses to join in this process of criticism and self-criticism, assuring them that the Fretilin Central Committee is "not authoritarian" and wants their criticism (speech by Prime Minister Nicolau Lobato, June 28 1976).

What then are the disadvantages the East Timorese have compared with the struggles in Indochina and Africa ?

The main and obvious limitation is the total blockade the Indonesians have imposed and the lack of a friendly or neutral country on their border through which supplies can brought.

The only border is of course with Indonesian Timor which has no evident underground movement of its own, and no means of easy contact with the outside world. It ,too, is virtually under blockade. The naval and air blockade, although not yet tested ,obviously poses enormous problems for contacting and aiding the guerrillas.

There is not even the normal commercial traffic that took place in countries such as Vietnam, Mozambique or Guine-Bissau. There are no commerical airlines, ships or road traffic. No visitors are allowed; the world press are excluded, even those likely to be favourable to the Indonesians.

Fretilin has only Radio Maubere and the Telecom link to maintain any contact with the outside world.

So unless this blockade is broken, the East Timorese people must , as no people have ever had before, rely on their own resources. They cannot count on the blockade being broken, for that would be to put trust in a very difficult, and at this point, unlikely possibility. They must make every bullet count, and spend much of their efforts in attempt to relenish their supply of weaponry by capturing it from the enemy. It should be noted that every reported clash contains mention of weapons captured, and a growing confidence visible in these messages that they are maintaining their supply by these means.

This was always a tactic employed particularly in Indochina by the liberation forces there. It should not be forgotten that the liberation of Phnom Penh was carried out to a substantial degree with American equipment captured from the puppet forces.

This poses the aggressors with a problem : to limit the number of weapons the East Timorese can capture, they must limit the number of times they can fall in ambush. That means they must build fortress garrisons in the towns and villages they have captured on the roads, but avoid going into the mountains and jungles off the roads. They must rely to a large extent on resupply by helicopter, and if they venture on the roads, go only in large numbers with heavy military escort.

While this tactic may be applicable in West Irian, where the guerrillas are poorly armed and only of nuisance value in the wild mountain and swamp areas they control, it cannot apply in East Timor. For to be content to remain only in heavily garrisoned towns, surrounded by Fretilin and without ready supplies of foodstuffs nearby, is to pass the initiative over to Fretilin, to pose enormous logistic problems , and leave the vast majority of the country, and the population in liberated areas. It means that town after town can be picked off by Fretilin forces, concentrating their forces and weaponry in one place at a time.

The Indonesians are already showing signs of adopting this tactic, and relying on massive destruction of villages and crops in liberated areas to bring the people to their knees.

But at the same time, they are forced to proceed with efforts to take new villages, to destroy Fretilin and militia forces that are constantly harrassing them, and to give some substance to their claim to "control" East Timor. In each successive attack, they lose heavily in men and weaponry.

Paradoxically, the more the invaders attempt to maintain an offensive position, essential in this sort of war, the more they lose supplies and weaponry and strengthen the Fretilin forces. If they retire to well-fortified garrisons, the more they hand the initiative to Fretilin and endanger these garrisons one by one.

After the breakthrough of the invaders in a number of areas in early July, the advance has once more been stemmed and the signs are that it is Fretilin that is passing over to the offensive. The dry season is drawing to a close ,with the wet season about to begin in some areas, such as around the border. By November,

and particularly by December, the wet season will be in full swing. The Indonesian garrisons in towns such as Laclubar, Krybas, Fatu Berleiu, captured by the enemy in the dry season, over roads that are totally impassable in the wet, will become very vulnerable, difficult if not impossible to supply.

The Indonesians will then have to decide whether to maintain their garrisons in such towns and villages, or whether to retreat, or to build them into fortresses, garrisoned with a high number of troops, into mini-Dien Bien Phus...

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The wet season beginning in a few months will be a real test for the invaders, and one in which they will be tested in full in terms of morale, logistics and preparedness to wage of long war.

The total isolation of the East Timorese Revolution in terms of the Indonesian blockade will not, in our opinion, prove a sufficiently negative factor to prevent the final victory of the Maubere.

If that is so, it will give the East Timorese people an honoured place in the ranks of liberated peoples, for to win in such isolation will prove that given a leadership and people prepared to engage in people's war, no matter the sacrifices, as a united whole, is sufficient to defeat any enemy.

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Sydney
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** We exclude here of course the press of Vietnam, China, Cuba, Mozambique, Angola and the other countries which have fully reported the struggle of the East Timorese people. Even in the "liberal" press of Europe, Fretilin news reports from inside East Timor are given a much better run than in most of the Australian press.